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THE SPIRIT OF INDIA

We reproduce below an article published under this title in June 1930 by Mr. René Guénon in the review Le Monde Nouveau. Our readers will find recalled here ideas that are familiar to them, but they will also find, concerning the role of India, views that the author has perhaps never expressed elsewhere with as much force and precision; and these considerations seemed to us sufficiently important to justify the reprinting of this article.
N. D. L. R.

The opposition between East and West, reduced to its simplest terms, is at bottom identical with that which one often likes to establish between contemplation and action. We have already explained ourselves on this subject on many occasions, and we have examined the different points of view from which one may place oneself in order to consider the relations between these two terms: are these really two contraries, or would they not rather be two complementaries, or again would there not in reality be between the one and the other a relation, not of coordination, but of subordination?

We shall therefore here only very briefly summarize these considerations, indispensable to whoever wishes to understand the spirit of the East in general and that of India in particular.

The point of view that consists in purely and simply opposing contemplation and action to one another is the most exterior and the most superficial of all. The opposition does indeed exist in appearances, but it cannot be absolutely irreducible; moreover, the same could be said of all contraries, which cease to be such as soon as one rises above a certain level, that at which their opposition has all its reality. To say

opposition or contrast is thereby to say disharmony or imbalance, that is to say something that can exist only under a particular and limited point of view; in the totality of things, equilibrium is made of the sum of all imbalances, and all partial disorders contribute, willingly or unwillingly, to the total order.

By considering contemplation and action as complementary, one places oneself at a point of view already deeper and truer than the preceding one, because the opposition is there reconciled and resolved, its two terms balancing one another in a certain way. It would then be a matter of two equally necessary elements that complete and support one another, and that constitute the double activity, interior and exterior, of one and the same being, whether it be each man taken individually or humanity envisaged collectively. This conception is assuredly more harmonious and more satisfying than the first; however, if one were to adhere to it exclusively, one would be tempted, by virtue of the correlation thus established, to place contemplation and action on the same level, so that one would only have to strive to keep the balance as equal as possible between them, without ever posing the question of any superiority of one in relation to the other.

Now, in fact, this question has always been posed, and, as concerns the antithesis of East and West, we can say that it consists precisely in this: that the East maintains the superiority of contemplation, whereas the West, and especially the modern West, on the contrary affirms the superiority of action over contemplation. Here, it is no longer a question of points of view each of which may have its reason for being and be accepted at least as the expression of a relative truth; a relation of subordination being irreversible, the two conceptions in presence are really contradictory, therefore exclusive of one another, so that necessarily one is true and the other false. One must therefore choose, and perhaps the necessity of this choice has never imposed itself with as much force and urgency as in present circumstances; perhaps it will impose itself even more in the near future.

In those of our works to which we have alluded above (1), we have set

forth that contemplation is superior to action, just as the immutable is superior to change. Action, being only a transitory and momentary modification of being, cannot have in itself its principle and sufficient reason; if it is not attached to a principle that is beyond its contingent domain, it is nothing but a pure illusion; and this principle from which it draws all the reality of which it is capable, both its existence and even its very possibility, can be found only in contemplation or, if one prefers, in knowledge.

Likewise, change, in its most general acceptation, is unintelligible and contradictory, that is to say impossible, without a principle from which it proceeds and which, by the very fact that it is its principle, cannot be subject to it, therefore is necessarily immutable; and this is why, in Western antiquity, Aristotle had affirmed the necessity of the "unmoved mover" of all things. It is evident that action belongs to the world of change, of "becoming"; knowledge alone makes it possible to leave this world and the limitations inherent in it, and, when it attains the immutable, it itself possesses immutability, for all knowledge is essentially identification with its object.

This is precisely what modern Westerners ignore, who, in matters of knowledge, no longer envisage anything but a rational and discursive knowledge, therefore indirect and imperfect, what one might call a knowledge by reflection, and who, more and more, do not even value this inferior knowledge except insofar as it can serve directly practical ends; engaged in action to the point of denying everything that surpasses it, they do not perceive that this very action thus degenerates, for lack of principle, into an agitation as vain as it is sterile.

In the social organization of India, which is nothing but an application of metaphysical doctrine to the human order, the relations of knowledge and action are represented by those of the two first castes, the Brāhmaṇas and the Kṣatriyas, of which they are respectively the proper functions. It is said that the Brāhmaṇa is the type of stable beings, and that the Kṣatriya is the type of mobile or changing beings; thus, all the beings of this world, according to their nature, are principally in relation

with the one or with the other, for there is a perfect correspondence between the cosmic order and the human order.

This does not mean, of course, that action is forbidden to the Brāhmaṇa, nor knowledge to the Kṣatriya, but they suit them, as it were, only accidentally and not essentially; the svadharma, the proper law of the caste, in conformity with the nature of the being who belongs to it, is in knowledge for the Brāhmaṇa, in action for the Kṣatriya. Thus the Brāhmaṇa is superior to the Kṣatriya, just as knowledge is superior to action; in other terms, spiritual authority is superior to temporal power, and it is by recognizing its subordination with respect to the former that the latter will be legitimate, that is to say that it will truly be what it ought to be; otherwise, separating itself from its principle, it can only be exercised in a disordered manner and will inevitably go to its ruin.

To the Kṣatriyas normally belongs all exterior power, since the domain of action is the exterior world; but this power is nothing without an interior, purely spiritual principle, which the authority of the Brāhmaṇas incarnates, and in which it finds its sole valid guarantee. In exchange for this guarantee, the Kṣatriyas must, with the help of the force at their disposal, assure to the Brāhmaṇas the means of accomplishing in peace, sheltered from disturbance and agitation, their own function of knowledge and teaching; this is what is represented under the figure of Skanda, the Lord of War, protecting the meditation of Gaṇeśa, the Lord of Knowledge.

Such are the regular relations of spiritual authority and temporal power; and if they were everywhere and always observed, no conflict could ever arise between the one and the other, each occupying the place that must return to it by virtue of the hierarchy of functions and beings, a hierarchy strictly in conformity with the nature of things.

One sees that the place that is made for the Kṣatriyas, and consequently for action, while being subordinate, is very far from negligible, since it comprises all exterior power, at once military, administrative, and judicial, which is synthesized in the royal function. The Brāhmaṇas have

to exercise only an invisible authority, which, as such, may be ignored by the vulgar, but which is nonetheless the principle of all visible power; this authority is like the pivot around which all things turn, the fixed axis around which the world accomplishes its revolution, the immutable center that directs and regulates cosmic movement without participating in it; and this is what is represented by the ancient symbol of the svastika, which is, for this reason, one of the attributes of Gaṇeśa.

It must be added that the place that should be made for action will, in application, be more or less great according to circumstances; indeed, it is the same with peoples as with individuals, and, whereas the nature of some is especially contemplative, that of others is especially active. There is doubtless no country where the aptitude for contemplation is as widespread and as generally developed as in India; and this is why the latter can be considered as representing par excellence the Oriental spirit.

On the contrary, among Western peoples, it is quite certain that it is the aptitude for action that predominates in the greatest number of men, and that, even if this tendency were not exaggerated and deviated as it is at present, it would nevertheless subsist, so that contemplation could never there be anything but the affair of a much more restricted elite. That would nevertheless suffice for everything to return to order, for spiritual power, quite unlike material force, is in no way based on number; but, at present, Westerners are truly nothing but men without caste, none of them occupying the place and function that would suit his nature.

This disorder is even rapidly spreading, one must not conceal it, and seems to be encroaching even upon the East, although it still affects it only in a very superficial way and much more limited than those who, knowing only more or less Westernized Orientals, imagine, do not suspect the little importance that these have in reality.

It is nonetheless true that there is here a danger which, despite everything, risks becoming aggravated, at least transitorily; the “Western peril” is not an empty word, and the West, which is itself its

first victim, seems to want to drag all humanity into the ruin with which it is threatened by its own fault.

This peril is that of disordered action, because deprived of its principle; such action is in itself nothing but pure nothingness, and it can lead only to a catastrophe. Yet, one will say, if this exists, it is because this very disorder must finally reenter the universal order, that it is an element of it in the same way as everything else; and, from a higher point of view, this is rigorously true. All beings, whether they know it or not, whether they will it or not, depend entirely on their principle in all that they are; disordered action itself is possible only through the principle of all action, but, because it is unconscious of this principle, because it does not recognize the dependence in which it stands with regard to it, it is without rule and without positive efficacy, and, if one may so express oneself, it possesses only the lowest degree of reality, that which is closest to pure and simple illusion, precisely because it is the farthest from the principle, in which alone is absolute reality.

From the point of view of the principle, there is only order; but from the point of view of contingencies, disorder exists, and, as concerns terrestrial humanity, we are at an epoch where this disorder appears to triumph.

One may ask why this is so, and Hindu doctrine, with the theory of cosmic cycles, provides an answer to this question. We are in the Kali-Yuga, in the dark age where spirituality is reduced to its minimum, by the very laws of the development of the human cycle, bringing about a sort of progressive materialization through its various periods, of which this one is the last; by human cycle, we understand here solely the duration of a Manvantara. Toward the end of this age, everything is confused, the castes are mixed, the family itself no longer exists; is this not exactly what we see around us?

Must one conclude from this that the present cycle is indeed touching its end, and that we shall soon see the dawn of a new Manvantara? One might be tempted to believe it, especially if one thinks of the increasing

speed with which events precipitate themselves; but perhaps disorder has not yet reached its most extreme point, perhaps humanity must descend still lower, into the excesses of a wholly material civilization, before being able to rise again toward the principle and toward spiritual and divine realities.

In any case, little does it matter: whether a little sooner or a little later, this descending development that modern Westerners call “progress” will find its limit, and then the “black age” will come to an end; then will appear the Kalkin-avatāra, He who is mounted on the white horse, who bears on his head a triple diadem, sign of sovereignty in the three worlds, and who holds in his hand a flaming sword like the tail of a comet; then the world of disorder and error will be destroyed, and, by the purifying and regenerating power of Agni, all things will be reestablished and restored in the integrity of their primordial state, the end of the present cycle being at the same time the beginning of the future cycle.

Those who know that it must be thus cannot, even in the midst of the worst confusion, lose their immutable serenity; however unfortunate it may be to live in an epoch of trouble and almost general obscurity, they cannot be affected by it in the depths of themselves, and this is what constitutes the strength of the true elite. Doubtless, if obscurity must still go on extending more and more, this elite may, even in the East, be reduced to a very small number; but it suffices that a few preserve integrally true knowledge, in order to be ready, when the times are fulfilled, to save all that can still be saved of the present world, and that will become the germ of the future world.

This role of preservation of the traditional spirit, with all that it truly implies when one understands it in its deepest sense, it is the East alone that can fulfill at present; we do not mean to say the entire East, since unfortunately the disorder that comes from the West can reach it in certain of its elements; but it is in the East alone that there still subsists a true elite, in which the traditional spirit is found with all its vitality.

Elsewhere, what remains of it is reduced to exterior forms whose significance has long since been more or less misunderstood, and, if something of the West can be saved, it will only be possible with the help of the East; but it will still be necessary that this help, in order to be effective, find a point of support in the Western world, and these are possibilities concerning which it would at present be very difficult to bring any precision.

Be that as it may, India has in a certain sense, in the ensemble of the East, a privileged situation under the aspect that we are considering, and the reason for this is that, without the traditional spirit, India would no longer be anything. Indeed, Hindu unity (we do not say Indian) is not a unity of race nor of language; it is exclusively a unity of tradition; Hindus are all those who effectively adhere to this tradition, and only those.

This explains what we said previously about the aptitude for contemplation, more general in India than anywhere else: participation in the tradition, in fact, is fully effective only insofar as it implies the comprehension of the doctrine, and this consists above all in metaphysical knowledge, since it is in the purely metaphysical order that the principle is found from which all the rest derives.

This is why India appears as more particularly destined to maintain to the end the supremacy of contemplation over action, to oppose by its elite an insurmountable barrier to the invasion of the modern Western spirit, to preserve intact, in the midst of a world agitated by incessant changes, the consciousness of the permanent, of the immutable, and of the eternal.

It must be clearly understood, moreover, that what is immutable is the principle alone, and that the applications to which it gives rise in all domains can and even must vary according to circumstances and epochs, for, whereas the principle is absolute, the applications are relative and contingent like the world to which they relate. Tradition allows indefinitely multiple and diverse adaptations in their modalities;

but all these adaptations, insofar as they are made rigorously according to the traditional spirit, are nothing other than the normal development of certain consequences that are eternally contained in the principle; it is therefore in all cases only a matter of rendering explicit what was hitherto implicit, and thus the foundation, the very substance of the doctrine, always remains identical beneath all the differences of exterior forms.

The applications may be of many kinds: such are notably, not only the social institutions to which we have already alluded, but also the sciences, when they are truly what they ought to be; and this shows the essential difference that exists between the conception of these traditional sciences and that of the sciences as the modern Western spirit has constituted them. Whereas the former derive all their value from their attachment to metaphysical doctrine, the latter, under the pretext of independence, are narrowly shut up within themselves and can only claim to push ever farther, but without leaving their limited domain or retreating its boundaries by a single step, an analysis that could thus be pursued indefinitely without one ever being any further advanced in true knowledge of things.

Is it by an obscure feeling of this impotence that moderns have come to prefer research to knowledge, or is it quite simply because this endless research satisfies their need for incessant agitation, which wants to be its own end? What could Orientals do with these vain sciences that the West claims to bring them, when they possess other sciences incomparably more real and more vast, and when the slightest effort of intellectual concentration teaches them far more than all these fragmentary and dispersed views, this chaotic mass of facts and notions that are linked only by hypotheses more or less fanciful, laboriously constructed only to be immediately overthrown and replaced by others no better founded?

And let one not overly extol, believing thereby to compensate for all their defects, the industrial and technical applications to which these sciences have given birth; no one thinks of contesting that they at least

have this practical utility, if their speculative value is rather illusory; but this is something in which the East can never truly take an interest, and it values these wholly material advantages too little to sacrifice its spirit for them, because it knows what is the immense superiority of the point of view of contemplation over that of action, and that all things that pass are nothingness in regard to the eternal.

True India, for us, is therefore not this more or less modernized, that is to say Westernized, India dreamed of by some young men educated in the Universities of Europe or America, and who, however proud they may be of the wholly exterior knowledge that they have acquired there, are nevertheless, from the Oriental point of view, nothing but perfect ignoramuses, constituting, in spite of their pretensions, the very opposite of an intellectual elite in the sense in which we understand it.

True India is that which always remains faithful to the teaching that its elite transmits through the centuries; it is that which integrally preserves the deposit of a tradition whose source goes back higher and farther than humanity; it is the India of Manu and of the Ṛṣis, the India of Śrī Rāma and of Śrī Kṛṣṇa.

We know that this was not always the land designated today by this name; doubtless even, since the primitive Arctic sojourn of which the Veda speaks, it successively occupied many different geographical situations; perhaps it will occupy others still, but little does it matter, for it is always there where the seat of this great tradition is found, whose maintenance among men is its mission and its reason for being.

By the uninterrupted chain of its Sages, its Gurus, and its Yogīs, it subsists through all the vicissitudes of the exterior world, unshakable like Meru; it will endure as long as the Sanātana Dharma (which one could translate as lex perennis, as exactly as a Western language permits), and it will never cease to contemplate all things, through the frontal eye of Śiva, in the serene immutability of the eternal present.

All hostile efforts will finally be shattered against the sole force of truth,

as clouds dissipate before the sun, even if they have succeeded in obscuring it momentarily from our sight. The destructive action of time leaves subsisting only that which is superior to time: it will devour all those who have limited their horizon to the world of change and placed all reality in becoming, those who have made a religion of the contingent and the transitory, for “he who sacrifices to a god will become the food of that god”; but what could it do against those who bear within themselves the consciousness of eternity?

THE CAVE AND THE LABYRINTH

(continued)[*]

The labyrinth, as M. J. Knight has rightly seen, has a double reason for being, in the sense that it allows or forbids, depending on the case, access to a certain place into which all must not enter indiscriminately; only those who are "qualified" will be able to traverse it to the end, while the others will be prevented from entering it or will lose their way along the route. One sees immediately that there is here the idea of a "selection" which is in evident relation with admission to initiation; the course of the labyrinth is therefore, in this respect, nothing other than a representation of initiatic trials; and it is easy to conceive that, when it served effectively as a means of access to certain sanctuaries, it could be arranged in such a way that the corresponding rites were accomplished within this course itself. Moreover, one finds here again the idea of a "journey," under the aspect in which it is assimilated to the trials themselves, as one may still observe at present in certain initiatic forms, in Freemasonry for example, where each of the symbolic trials is precisely designated as a "journey."

Another equivalent symbolism is that of the "pilgrimage"; and we recall in this connection the labyrinths formerly traced on the paving of certain churches, whose traversal was regarded as a "substitute" for pilgrimage to the Holy Land; moreover, if the point at which this course arrives represents a place reserved for the "elect," this place is indeed truly a "Holy Land" in the initiatic sense of this expression; in other terms, this point is nothing other than the image of a spiritual center, just as every place of initiation equally is.[1]

It goes without saying, on the other hand, that the use of the labyrinth as a means of defense or protection is susceptible of diverse applications

**See the October 1937 issue.*

1 M. J. Knight mentions these labyrinths, but attributes to them a simply religious signification; he seems to ignore that they pertain in no way to esoteric doctrine, but solely to the symbolism of initiatic organizations.

outside the initiatic domain; thus the author notes in particular its "tactical" use at the entrance of certain ancient cities and other fortified places. However, it is an error to believe that in this case it is a question of a purely profane usage, which would even have been the earliest in date and would then have suggested the idea of ritual usage; there is here properly a reversal of normal relationships, which is moreover in conformity with modern conceptions, but with these alone, and which it is therefore entirely illegitimate to attribute to ancient civilizations. In fact, in every civilization having a strictly traditional character, all things necessarily begin with the principle, or with what is closest to it, and from there descend to increasingly contingent applications; and, in addition, even these latter are never envisaged from the profane point of view, which is, as we have already often explained, only the result of a degeneration that has caused the loss of awareness of their attachment to the principle. In the case in question, one could fairly easily perceive that there is something other than what modern "tacticians" would see there, by the simple observation that this "labyrinthine" mode of defense was not employed solely against human enemies, but also against hostile psychic influences, which clearly indicates that it must have possessed in itself a ritual value.[2]

But there is more still: the foundation of cities, the choice of their location, and the plan according to which they were constructed were subject to rules that pertained essentially to "sacred science," and which consequently were very far from responding only to "utilitarian" ends, at least in the exclusively material sense currently given to this word; however foreign these things may be to the mentality of our contemporaries, one must nevertheless take them into account, failing which those who study the vestiges of ancient civilizations will never be able to understand the true meaning and the reason for being of what they observe there, even for what corresponds simply to what is today agreed to be called the domain of "ordinary life," but which then also in

2 We shall not insist, in order not to stray too far from the subject, on the "labyrinthine" character of certain processions which, presenting above all the character of rites of protection or "apotropaic" rites as the author says, are directly connected with the same order of considerations: it is essentially a matter of irritating and diverting harmful influences, by a "technique" based on knowledge of certain laws according to which these influences exercise their action.

reality possessed a properly ritual and traditional character.

As for the origin of the very name of the labyrinth, it is rather obscure and has given rise to many discussions; it seems indeed that, contrary to what some have thought, it is not directly connected to that of the labrys or Cretan double axe, but that both derive equally from the same very ancient word designating stone (root la, whence laos in Greek, lapis in Latin), so that, etymologically, the labyrinth might in sum be nothing other than a stone construction, belonging to the class of constructions called "cyclopean." However, this is only the most exterior signification of this name, which, in a deeper sense, is connected with the whole ensemble of the symbolism of the stone, of which we have had occasion to speak on various occasions, whether with regard to the "betyls" or with regard to the "thunderstones" (identified precisely with the stone axe or labrys), and which still presents many other aspects. M. J. Smith has at least glimpsed this, for he alludes to men "born of stone" (which, let us note in passing, provides the explanation of the Greek word laos), of whom the legend of Deucalion offers the best-known example: this relates to a certain period whose more precise study, if it were possible, would assuredly allow one to give the so-called "Stone Age" a quite different meaning from that attributed to it by prehistorians.

We are moreover brought back by this to the cave, which, insofar as it is hollowed out in rock, naturally or artificially, also pertains rather closely to the same symbolism;[3] but we must add that this is not a reason to suppose that the labyrinth itself must necessarily also have been hollowed out in rock: although this may have been the case in certain instances, this is only an accidental element, one might say, and cannot enter into its very definition, for whatever the relations of the cave and the labyrinth may be, it is nevertheless important not to confuse them, especially when it is a question of the initiatic cave, which we have here more particularly in view.

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3 Prehistoric caves were very probably not habitations, as is ordinarily believed, but the sanctuaries of the "men of stone," understood in the sense we have just indicated; it is therefore within the traditional forms of the period in question that the cave would have received, in relation to a certain "occultation" of knowledge, the character of symbol of spiritual centers, and consequently of a place of initiation.

Indeed, it is quite evident that if the cave is the place where initiation itself is accomplished, the labyrinth, the place of the preliminary trials, can be nothing more than the path that leads to it, at the same time as the obstacle that forbids access to profane "non-qualified" persons. We moreover recall that at Cumae it was on the doors that the labyrinth was represented, as if, in a certain way, this representation here took the place of the labyrinth itself;[4] and one could say that Aeneas, while stopping at the entrance to contemplate it, in fact traverses the labyrinth mentally, if not bodily. On the other hand, it does not appear that this mode of access was always exclusively reserved for sanctuaries established in caves or symbolically assimilated to them, since, as we have already indicated, this is not a feature common to all traditional forms; and the reason for being of the labyrinth, as defined above, may equally well suit the approaches to any place of initiation, any sanctuary destined for the "mysteries" and not for public rites. This reservation having been made, there is nevertheless reason to think that, at least originally, the use of the labyrinth must have been linked more particularly to that of the initiatic cave: this is because both appear to have belonged at first to the same traditional forms, those of that period of the "men of stone" to which we have just alluded; they would thus have begun by being closely united, even though they did not remain so invariably in all later forms.

If we consider the case in which the labyrinth is in connection with the cave, the latter, which it surrounds with its windings and to which it ultimately leads, thereby occupies, in the ensemble thus constituted, the most interior and central point, which corresponds well to the idea of the spiritual center and also agrees with the equivalent symbolism of the heart, to which we propose to return. One must further remark that when the same cave is at once the place of initiatic death and that of the "second birth," it must from then on be regarded as giving access not only to subterranean or "infernal" domains, but also to supra-terrestrial domains; this again corresponds to the notion of the central point, which is, both in the macrocosmic order and in the microcosmic order, that at

4 A similar case, in this respect, is that of "labyrinthine" figures traced on walls, in ancient Greece, to forbid access to houses by harmful influences.

which communication with all superior and inferior states is effected; and it is only thus that the cave can be, as we have said, the complete image of the world, insofar as all these states must be reflected there equally; were it otherwise, the assimilation of its vault to the sky would be absolutely incomprehensible.

But, on the other hand, if it is in the cave itself that, between initiatic death and the "second birth," the "descent into Hell" is accomplished, one sees that one must take great care not to consider this descent as represented by the traversal of the labyrinth, and then one may still ask to what the latter corresponds in reality: these are the "outer darkness," to which we have already alluded, and to which perfectly applies the state of "wandering," if one may employ this word, of which such a traversal is the exact expression. This question of the "outer darkness" could still give rise to further clarifications, but this would lead us beyond the limits of the present article; moreover, we believe we have said enough to show, on the one hand, the interest presented by researches such as those expounded in the book of M. J. Knight, but also, on the other hand, the necessity, in order to establish their results correctly and to grasp their true scope, of a properly "technical" knowledge of what is involved—knowledge without which one will never arrive at anything other than hypothetical and incomplete reconstructions which, even insofar as they are not falsified by some preconceived idea, will remain as "dead" as the vestiges themselves that served as their point of departure.